

Autumn 2023

VOLUME 4, ISSUE 1

Welcome to the Autumn 2023 issue of the RSPH Arts and Health newsletter. This Special Issue features rich and diverse work about *Neurodiversity and Creative Health*. Our aim is to create new understanding and share experiences of creative neurodivergent lives with our 2000 plus members. Dr Ranjita Dhital and Dr Louise Younie are coordinators of this volume.

Being neurodivergent, refers to “being” rather than “having” ADHD, autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, and other profiles. Furthermore, if you are dyslexic, you are also likely to be ADHD, as well as embody combinations of other profiles. Therefore, neurodivergent people are highly diverse - full disclosure, I’m neurodivergent (Ranjita). However, most share a “spiky” performance

profile; where we excel at certain activities and experience challenges in others – greater challenges than might be “expected” given our high performance in others. Neurotypical profiles are usually smoother, or less “spiky” across a range of activities. These often stark contrasts in ability can create struggles in day-to-day living and at work, especially as these differences are invisible and often masked to “fit in”.

New SIG members are welcome from the broad area of public health including researchers, practitioners in public health, the arts and any health and social care setting globally. Students from anywhere and any background are encouraged to join the SIG. We also offer a discount to students for joining.

For more information about the SIG and RSPH membership please [click here](#)

Follow us on Twitter:
[@RSPH_artshealth](#)

Details on submission can be found at the end of the newsletter.

Wellbeing through crafting and songwriting

Beth Woolley



I’m self-diagnosed as autistic and currently awaiting an NHS diagnosis - and have been for the last 2.5 years. I found out I hit the criteria for ASD at the age of 20, just after recovering from a severe mental health breakdown. Being autistic influences nearly every part of my life. It’s taken a while to understand how and why but over the last few years, I’ve learned a great deal about how to deal with my own mental health and wellbeing. One of my favourite ways to improve my wellbeing is by crocheting.

I’ve included some pictures of my creations below. Upon discussions with fellow autistic people, I realised there was more to my crocheting than originally met the eye. It’s my way of stimming. Stimming is a way of regulating and or processing sensory input, stress or anxiety and typically involves a repetitive soothing action. There’s lots of different expressions of stimming, from swaying, to hand flapping, bouncing, complicated movement or in my case, repeatedly knotting wool together with a hook

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to create toys, keychains, jumpers, hats, scarves and blankets. I find this really interesting as it ties into what I am currently learning about on my MASc in Creative Health. My entire course looks at creative



non-medicalised ways we can use hobbies, nature, culture, arts and more to aid our own wellbeing. I only recently started crocheting in class (despite having learned to crochet at the age of 8). One of my

tutors on the course inspired me to start when I caught her knitting socks in class and realised there was nothing stopping me from bringing my wool in and being creative while learning. Since that moment, not only have many creations been made and given to friends, my mental health has stabilised and my understanding of being autistic has grown significantly.

My crocheting is the perfect example of my learning on my course, as it pulls together my autistic needs with creative expression. It's quite literally creative health in action.

Instagram b3thw00lley

Unjumbled

Sumita

i started doing this thing where i'd make 'not-a-song'-song song-things and immediately throw them online before i know what they are. i acknowledge the process as being a translation-communication process; a therapeutic process; (a terrifying process); an essential process to my normodivergent/neurodivergent understanding of my beingness. the process is my processing.

*this is not a love song,
this is not a like song,
this is not a sad song*

*this is not a fun song
this is not even a 'proper' song,
this is just this-me singing a not-a-song..
i'm singing because it's a compulsion
and all of the other compulsions
have less preferable consequences..
i'm singing because, what's the other option...
well, i know another option..
other djn-just...-then-just...
other than just...
other than just to not do it anymore... <laughs>
i am trying to convince myself to keep communicating when i don't want to because what's the other option? ..well, i know another*

*option...
other than just to not do it anymore...
<sigh>
i am trying to ..convince myself to keep communicating
so this is not a 'proper' song
this is just this-me singing a not-a-song
this is not a love song
this is not a like song
this is not a fun song
this is just this-me singing a not-a-song..
this is just this-me singing a not-a-song song
this is just me singing this song:
this 'not-a-song'-song song*

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the spaces i create for myself are essential to my normodivergent-neurodivergent processing. i use the word normodivergent as well as (and sometimes instead of) neurodivergent, to acknowledge the unfixedness of social-norm-majorities. norm-majority-vibes change from situation to situation to situation, and sometimes i'm not of the norm-majority amongst neurodivergent people - or sometimes i'm normotypical in a particular space, whilst still relating with being 'neurodivergent', due to the view of my processing style in a more zoomed-out socio-majority world-perspective. social spaces are something that we carry our normorealities (our norm-realities - our norm ways of being / processing

/ thinking / understanding / existing) through and into. i create spaces for myself so that i can function through my own normorealities, accepting all of my beingnesses as my Beingness, rather than viewing them through 'different' 'other' as default (even if 'different' 'othered' can become a default feeling). my IndoorGoblin space offered me Permission to Be, not only as and with IndoorGoblin, but also as and through Sumita - as Sumita Unjumbled (Sumita still jumbled, still unjumbling, always!). this songwriting-therapy space i created for myself, through live-'art'-ish 'see what appears and throw it on the internet', facilitates that unjumbling - publicly, acceptingly, exposingly, expressingly, through a performance of a performance of a

performance, revealing inner-brain layers of translation-communication. even the writing of the captions for the videos become a part of the process, forcing me to engage in words and feelings and word-feelings and feeling-words - something that my beingness resists, but something which is so important to my beingness. (by the way, i don't even 'play' guitar... but i play it anyway... i guess that means i play guitar?)

www.sumitaunjumbled.com
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[@sumita_unjumbled](https://www.instagram.com/sumita_unjumbled)

Sensing spaces

Creative Spatial Environments for Autistic People

Joan Love

Our non-verbal autistic son, with complex health needs, learning difficulties, and requiring 1:1 support 24/7, has sparked many surprise moments. To some, his skills might not seem special, but to us they are a wonder. They range from navigating his way to our house from almost any location in our hometown; to walking

across on a single, narrow high bar on a climbing frame as if walking along a normal pavement; to easily locating our car in any car park, no matter the size, from the other side of an unknown town.

He continually inspires my research into autism-friendly architecture. Initially, I noticed his difficulty transitioning from playground to school lobby, and then to his classroom. Moving between spaces often triggered a meltdown, and he was not alone, many of his fellow

autistic classmates were similarly distressed.

Environmental sensory issues became a source of immense interest to me, and I developed a new research approach involving autism-friendly design briefs for undergraduate Interior Architecture and Design students at Leeds Beckett University. The project encourages

students to seek out behavioural issues some autistic people have with their physical environment and

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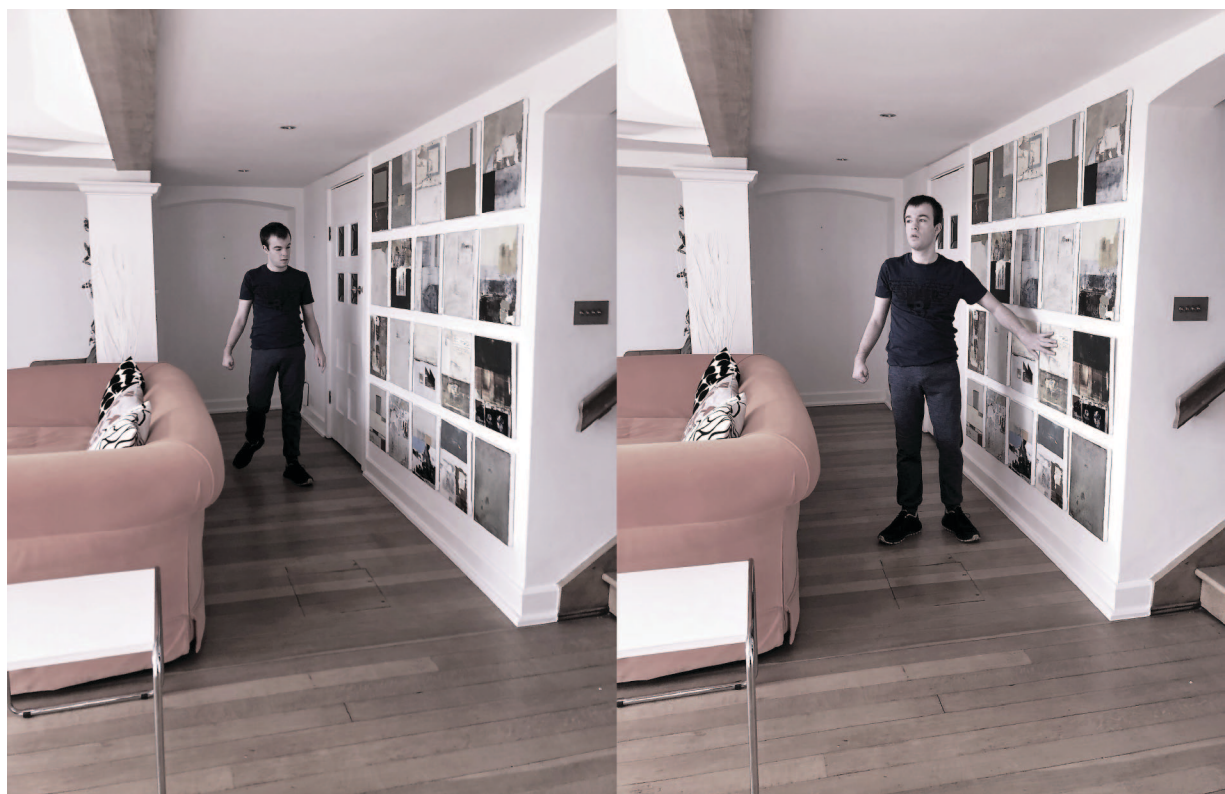
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produce creative design solutions improving health, wellbeing and quality of life.

This part-live pedagogic project has progressed and deepened over 9 years, often in parallel to our son's developing life stages. The project was initially informed by his junior and then senior autism schools when his autism specific teachers put me in touch with 8 other special schools as invaluable case studies for the university students.

He later attended a Specialist College with residential provision and my research started to encompass the activities and interests of 18+ autistic young people and the home living environment. I involved autism experts from the College, including cross-disciplinary inputs from a specialist occupational therapist, advanced sensory integration practitioner and senior behaviour analyst.

Important outputs included living environments designed by students



Some will find it useful to have space to pace, a self-stimulatory behaviour or "stimming" that helps some autistic people self-regulate. This living space incorporates a creative sensory wall made up of small textured canvases to provide sensory feedback.

incorporating spaces where autistic residents could engage in creative activity, promoting wellbeing and even business opportunities. Designs included arts spaces harvesting and reusing rainwater in the production of sensory arts cards, bonsai tree growing zones, and an area for the production of jam.

Thanks to our son, my research assists future professionals shape responsive and creative spatial environments and has uncovered

new information in the form of 'ten spatial transitioning platforms' and 'ten sensory living themes' relating to behaviour-informed design.

Joan Love

Senior Lecturer in Interior Architecture, Leeds School of Arts, Leeds Beckett University

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Picturing autistic experiences of shared public space

Stuart Neilson

As an autistic adult, I find public places anxiety-provoking, full of intense sensory feelings, and very often difficult to navigate because their design seems illogical. I started photographing places I find comfortable or inhospitable to illustrate my lectures and writing about sensory issues and social inclusion. Over the past five years I have been developing techniques to process video in order to capture unfolding events in a place, to make still images capturing time as well as space. A photograph is a snapshot and often fails to display the residual of visual experiences and completed actions that form my memory of the place. I find the process itself absorbing and calming, moderating my anxiety and a powerful method to explore my own reactions to public places, and to communicate my reactions and feelings to other people.

Public space is vital to physical and mental health. The network of places where we socialise, enjoy the sunshine, exercise and navigate to meet our everyday needs has been particularly highlighted during the past three years of social distancing, working from home and interventions to increase space for walking and outdoor eating and drinking.

I try to convey my impression of the place, the movement within the place, and to identify where I would position myself to maximise my sense of safety, and to minimise my sensory and social anxiety. When my images succeed, I am able to share my sense of place, cultivating strangeness for the viewer who finds public space so familiar and comfortable that they rarely give its features any serious attention.

In the last three years I have been privileged to collaborate with the architect Magda Mostafa, who is an international expert on inclusive design. Magda Mostafa's curated exhibition in the 2023 Venice Architecture Biennale includes images from autistic creators around the world, and features my images and videos of public space.

I would never call myself a person with a disability, but I do frequently feel disabled by design. My pictures challenge disabling and exclusionary design choices.



<https://wordpress.stuartneilson.com>

"A Case for Sensory Decolonisation: Autistic Escape" is exhibited by the European Cultural Centre in Palazzo Bembo until 21 November 2023, in conjunction with the Venice Architectural Biennale.

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Creative prose

Self Portrait, "What?"

Mike Barrett

The phenomenon of black holes has been a subject of fascination and intrigue for decades. One question that has puzzled scientists is whether black holes possess emotions, as they do not appear to express them on their faces.

Some neuro-physicists have contended that black holes do not have emotions, while others have posited that the immense emotional gravity of black holes prevents their feelings from escaping the event-horizon, thereby suppressing them within.

However, recent discoveries have shed new light on the matter. Studies have revealed the presence of a halo of hair surrounding black holes, which appears to be an expression of their emotions.

This finding has significant implications for our understanding of the emotional experiences of black holes and how they interact with the surrounding environment.

Further research is needed to elucidate the mechanisms behind the expression of emotions in the halo of hair, and to investigate how this may affect the behaviour of black holes



in different scenarios. Nevertheless, this breakthrough discovery marks a significant milestone in our quest to comprehend their enigmatic nature. It is hoped that this discovery will lead to improved strategies for integrating them into galactic culture.

I was reflecting on the unavailability of an endy emotions (according to enties) in both the image and the text. That faces are unpeopled

continents waiting to be 'discovered' (diagnosed). We are the black holes in need of a normative explanation.

Mike

"Endy emotions" refers to "ND" or neurodivergent emotion

"enties" refers to "neurotypical"

No Gallery Research Space, Un-iversity

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A woman who sees too much

Mah Rana

It's true, an optometrist told me that I see too much. But is this a bad thing – to have some kind of extended vision?

In *The Extended Mind* Annie Murphy Paul describes a scene from the 2002 film *Minority Report*:

Chief of Precrime John Anderton, played by Tom Cruise, stands in front of a bank of gigantic computer screens. He is reviewing evidence of a crime yet to be committed, but

this is no staid intellectual exercise; the way he interacts with the information splayed before him is active, almost tactile. He reaches out with his hands to grab and move images as if they were physical objects; he turns his head to catch a scene unfolding in his peripheral vision; he takes a step forward to inspect a picture more closely.

I'm not sure if I'm alone in experiencing this, but the first time I saw *Minority Report* and watched the protagonist John Anderton interacting with the bank of gigantic

computer screens, I kept thinking "but that's what my brain feels like". This was 20 years before my ADHD diagnosis and the 'clarity of how and why' that comes with it. Such as, creativity is singularly reliable because it is constantly shape-shifting in my peripheral vision. Frequently, I'll turn my 'mind' to catch hold of it – to play with it more closely.

Ref:

Paul, A. M. (2021). *The extended mind: The power of thinking outside the brain*. Eamon Dolan Books

ADHD and you and me – A love story

Ephrat Huss

You know that song, "This is for all the lonely people"? Well "this is for all the ADHD people - " it sounds less catchy, but we are often pretty lonely because our minds are different from yours even when we are with you, and on top of that there is the work of trying to hide it. I was born in a time before ADHD was diagnosed, which was a good thing and a bad thing. I was born in the sixties, in London which was then pretty similar to my internal ADHD, intense and changing and so slippery you could easily fall off, like those balance balls that I try to stand on in my old ladies' gym class.

My parents shifted houses, partners, Jewishness, on a regular basis, led by the tyranny of love and self-fulfilment, like in an exhausting Hora dance. Husbands and children got lost under endless heaving piles of potential projects, people, books, arts activities, and ADHD- could easily be mislaid in that pile. My mind and body slipped between these things and no one noticed. They were proud I was bad at school, hating the system. They probably, according to the genetic model, also had ADHD, maybe the world did then - diversity versus disability, nature versus nurture - a wandering mind, a wandering people.

I honed my ADHD ability to wriggle into the spaces in between (languages, countries, parents) making cakes to sweeten the

arguments at home - until today my cakes taste good but look a little confused.

But then I was grown up, and I had to find my own life's structure. I wandered round the dyspraxic corridors of the University, and no one could read my writing. I couldn't find shelves in the library, and so I always read books next to the ones I needed. I loved those shelves, I took out lots of books, and my knowledge went sideways, broadening, like a pregnancy, rather than getting sharper. I got low marks, and saw the disappointment in my stepfather's eyes and I myself didn't understand, was I clever or stupid? Who knew? And, if I went to the toilet I charged into the broom cupboards, and panicked

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because I couldn't find the door, and one day in those wanderings I bashed into the wrong person, and I married him. It was easier to try to latch onto this man who was my opposite, going from A to B in straight lines.

But, after three months with the signature impulsivity of ADHD, I divorced him, reader. That first one small magic "no" turned out to be the absolute right door. And then came the seven good years.

First, a professor liked my

comments and told me, and then I got a student job as a group youth leader and my generalizing mind wove the youth together. I moved to study social work that was round (and toilets on the left) and I did better with the people energy, instead of the quiet disdain of the humanities with its closed doors and complicated corridors.

I then got diagnosed, and it turned out it wasn't my fault. and then technology intervened and laptops with spell-correctors, and I started

swimming in the campus pool, every day and I was beginning to love -being me and when I bumped into my second husband at the campus bus stop, he smelled right, and his broken bits were perfect and I kissed him and I became a princess. He told me that I couldn't see the door, but I could always find a window, and I believed him. (maybe the sixties were right about love)

Research

Photography series called 'Saturated'

Siyu (Suzanna) Chen

The 'Saturated' collection aims to show my unique sensory experiences as an autistic person with ADHD. Particularly, I want the photos to portray instances where I see specific attributes in the environment as extraordinarily strong and vibrant while others as trivial. All three of the pictures are shot in nature since it is where the sensory stimuli are majestic instead of overwhelming.

The three photographs were exhibited at "The Art of Neurodiversity: Learning from Neurodivergent Creativity"

conference at City, University of New York (CUNY) May 2023. Please see other amazing neurodivergent creatives and their works:
<https://cunysps.swoogo.com/cunynd/virtualgallery?i=z6tnq7vmyrLWPfJcllepUHHJwkF6uOtiM>.

Even though neurodivergent students make up a significant amount of the student population, they often face significant challenges which regularly result in them not completing their higher education. It is estimated that less than 40% of autistic students complete their studies in the UK. From the personal experiences of our neurodivergent



research team and blogs written by other neurodivergent students, it is clear that while some students have extremely positive experiences and complete their education, others struggle. To better support these

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students, it is crucial to understand in which areas support is most needed. The focus of this research will be on UK university students with a wide range of neurodivergent conditions - in particular, students at three London Russell Group universities. Russell group universities are world class research-intensive universities that provide outstanding teaching and learning experiences. It is, therefore, important to understand if these exceptional levels of teaching are accessible enough for neurodivergent students to benefit from. The study will also highlight the lived experiences of neurodivergent



students in higher education, as the resulting report will include university policy suggestions based on issues and good practices identified in actual responses from neurodivergent participants. It is hoped that the research will be a vessel for truly inclusive and constructive conversations towards more accessible universities.



Suzanna (Siyu) Chen, she/they
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RE-STAR: how arts-based practices are adding value to adolescent mental health research

By Sylvan Baker, Georgia Pavlopoulou & Susie Chandler on behalf of the RE-STAR team

Regulating Emotions – Strengthening Adolescent Resilience (RE-STAR) is a multi-disciplinary research programme that aims to find ways of reducing the risk of adolescent

depression in autistic young people and those with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). RE-STAR brings together creative practitioners and scientists to work towards this goal. Here we describe how arts-based practices are adding value to adolescent mental health research.

Shaping research design

From the outset, RE-STAR has been using creative practice methods to co-produce the aims, objectives and methods of the scientific research

with its Youth Researcher Panel (Y-RP), a group of young adults with diagnoses of autism and/or ADHD. In our initial Y-RP meetings, we employed participatory visual arts methods to collect Y-RP thoughts and ideas on our research topic. These creative forms of communication included poetry, creative writing, photography, drawing and design, and allowed the Y-RP and the interdisciplinary researchers to collectively consider the range of perspectives, nuances and

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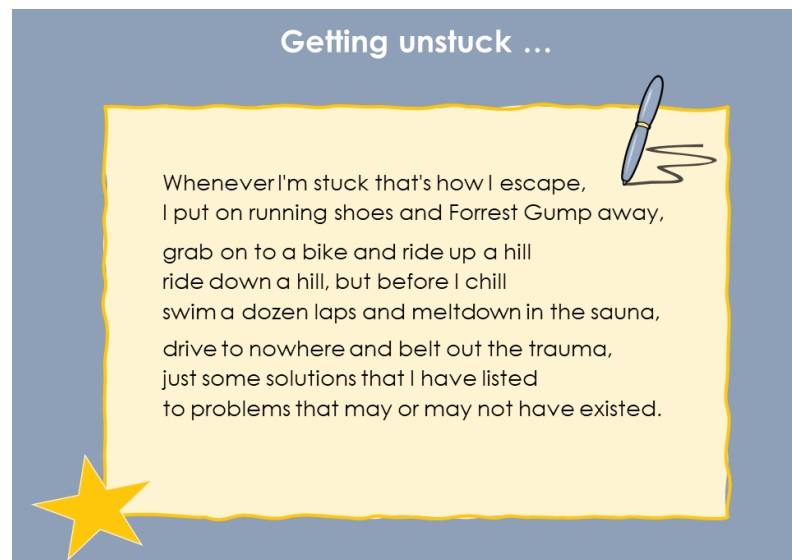
narratives that sit around the topic of neurodivergence and mental health. Emerging topics became themes for our interview schedule which formed part of our subsequent data collection.



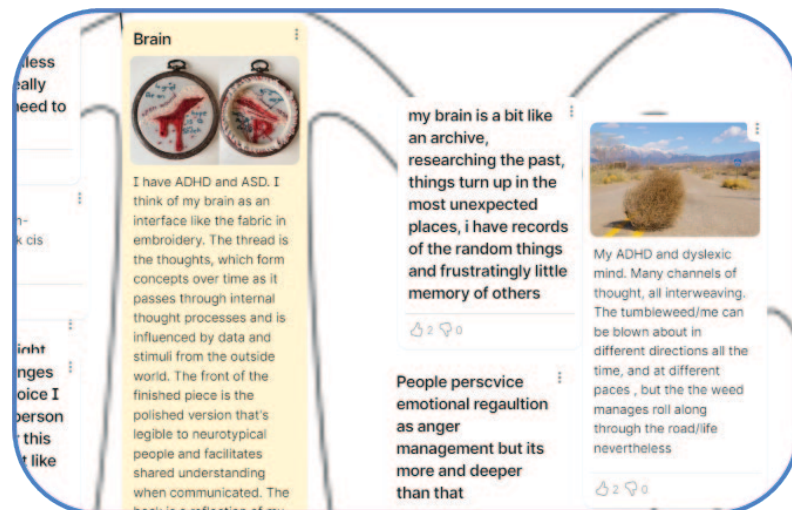
"A colourful shirt that shows how my brain works ... bright ... unconventional"
(Y-RP member, with diagnoses of ADHD and autism).

Enriching data collection

Within our qualitative interview study, we invited participants to express their thoughts and understandings about their emotional lives, by working through metaphor. Participants created 'sculptures', made in Lego or clay, collected photographs, wrote poetry or made drawings. This offered a child-led focus and agenda,



A poem by a Y-RP member with diagnosis of autism.



Extract from padlet activity with Y-RP.

which allowed in research themes that were not necessarily considered a priori. Additionally, it allowed participants with different processing styles an opportunity to choose for themselves in advance, what and how

they wanted to communicate with us.

Knowledge exchange and public engagement

Arts-based practices within RE-STAR have provided a platform to

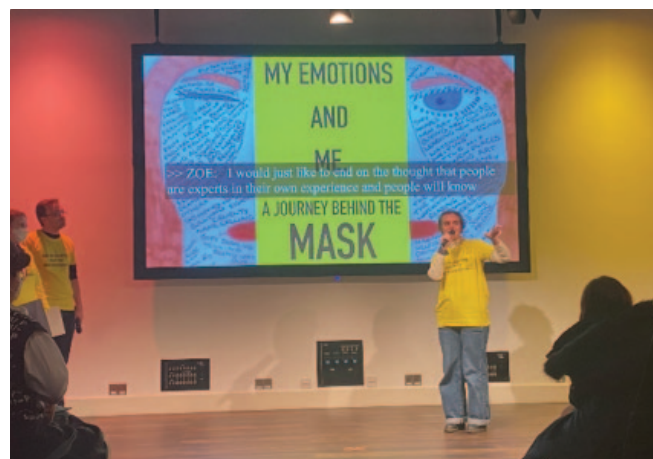
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Photo of Lego models representing different emotions, by research participant (age 12 with diagnoses of autism and ADHD).



Public engagement event, co-hosted by the Y-RP showcasing some of the creative artefacts from our first study.

communicate our research findings with wider audiences. This has been most clearly evidenced in our public engagement event, My Emotions and Me, which was co-delivered by our Y-RP and

academic researchers. Here, approaches such as verbatim formula and living library, alongside visual and auditory installations served to open up the dialogue between the research team, Y-RP and stakeholders.

If you would like to hear more about RE-STAR, please go to our website: www.kcl.ac.uk/research/re-star or email us at re-starinfo@kcl.ac.uk

Submitting to the Newsletter and deadlines

We very much welcome your contributions to future issues of the newsletter. Your contributions could be related to news from the sector, up-and-coming conference or events, case study and research. To submit material please do so in a Word document that is attached to an email with the subject line "RSPH SIG newsletter".

Please keep submissions to about 300- 400 words or less. Send submissions to the newsletter's coordinators, Dr Louise Younie - m.l.a.younie@qmul.ac.uk and Dr Ranjita Dhital - r.dhital@ucl.ac.uk.

Copy deadline for the next issue is 12 January. Publication date will be within 30 days of the respective copy deadline whenever possible so please keep this in mind regarding future dated submissions for conferences and CPD events. The newsletter can also accept up to two photos per submission; if people can be identified in a photograph (frontal views) you will need to submit a photo consent form obtainable from Meghan Cordery at: mcordery@rsph.org.uk.



Dr Ranjita Dhital



Dr Louise Younie

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